

Buster Keaton's Comedy of Hegelian Beauty and the Body

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Dedicated to the Memory of Francis Ramirez

*Do not expect the form to come before the idea;
they will arrive at the same time.*
Arnold Schönberg

‘Comedy,’ according to Aristotle, ‘is an imitation of inferior people – not, however, with respect to every kind of defect: the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful’ (Aristotle, 1966: 9). In the field of silent comic cinema, there are many examples of inferior body shape, which supports Aristotle’s statement that what is funny is linked to what is ugly. Consider, for example, the obesity of Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle or Oliver Hardy, Ben Turpin’s cross-eyed gaze, and the skeletal thinness of Larry Semon. Alongside these exaggerations of bodily imperfections can be found an emphasis on the debasement of the representation of bodily functions, especially those related to eating. A recurring theme is that of the monstrous meal: in *The Gold Rush*, Charlie eats his shoes, while in *Way Out West*, Laurel snacks on Ollie’s hat. The gag of cream pies smashed in faces, along with references to the scatological and other ‘unpleasant odors’, further strengthens the association between food and uncleanness. This comedic ugliness is also linked to moral inferiority. The burlesque character is always deficient in some way, whether he is made a fool of by others or makes a fool of himself. His behaviour is idiotic, underhanded, gluttonous, vindictive, and greedy.

In light of this brief overview, Buster Keaton stands out as a shining exception: his comedy is entirely derived from the aesthetic. Keaton’s visual comedy is a comedy of beauty (in the Hegelian sense). He moves his graceful body in spatial configurations characterised by order and symmetry. The agility, coordination, and measured precision of his gestures, together with the virtuosity of his relationship with gravity, evoke both the world of the circus (the discipline of acrobats) and the 19th-century Romantic marionette (as opposed to the ‘human machine’).

In 1810 Heinrich von Kleist wrote the following about marionette theatre: ‘Each movement has its own centre of gravity; one need only direct it from the inside of the puppet. The limbs, which merely hang from the body, follow along naturally, without any intervention on the part of the puppeteer.’ He concludes that ‘[g]race returns when

consciousness is absolute, such that it appears in its purest form within a human shape that either has no consciousness, or infinite consciousness, such as in a marionette or a god' (von Kleist, 2004).

This concept of the absolute, or of a god, corresponds to German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's 'Absolute Mind.' Recall that, for Hegel, art expresses the life of the mind, and works of art allow this inner life to be felt and perceived.

The visual pleasure that certain scenes of Keaton's silent films procure is not unlike the joy felt when the pieces of a puzzle finally fall into place after having long resisted one's attempts to solve it. What was once complex and confusing becomes simple and clear. This feeling of well-being, familiar to chess players, was described by French writer Julien Gracq as follows: 'The solution appeared from this essential, order-giving evidence, which is at first stupefying and seems to demonstrate better than anything else what the *revolution* of discovery can be' (Gracq, 1945:77).

Some of Keaton's images offer us a fleeting impression of perfection. They bring about a sense of fulfilment and give us a feeling of inner accomplishment. Though fleeting, this sensation is at the same time infinitely desirable. Our existence is all the richer for such precious moments.

'The sight of movement – of a horse, an athlete, a bird – brings us happiness.' (Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*)

But is beauty still pertinent as a criterion for good taste? If it is not, then what is the relevance of Keaton's silent films today?

The body plays a key role. In his brilliant essay, which, unfortunately, is virtually unknown outside of France, Vincent Amiel remarks that the contrast between the restraint of Keaton's facial expressions and the momentum that drives the movement of his entire body considerably reduces the validity of a possible 'psychological explanation' of his behaviour. The truth of his body is felt to come not 'from the inside' but 'from the outside.' The primacy of long shots gives an even more nuanced view to this aspect of the aesthetic adventure found in Keaton's silent films. Vincent Amiel goes on to say that '[a]t its most tragic, there is only the ballet of gestures and transported bodies, whose movement can be explained only by weight, loss of balance, momentum, sloping planes, or the wind.' He adds that '[t]he clean lines of Keaton's running or his dream-like ballets in the space of the frame, rather than abstracting away from representation and formalizing it, provide the spectator with a sort of true understanding – intimate and difficult to define – of self-experience' (Amiel, 1998: 24,

26). Keaton's physical feats, however minutely broken down in their execution or completion, and his precisely planned postures only express his unalienable freedom. It is not a question of comparing the body to a machine, but rather of pointing out the shortcomings of the latter. Human gestures surpass mechanical movements because of their *internal* necessity, even if the need for precision comes from another source: Keaton's running is dream-like, and his acrobatics are 'diabolical.' With neither intention nor dependence, they take advantage of the full capacities of the body. It is not the 'human machine' that is on display here, but rather the precision of the movement and the extraordinary power of perception that is sometimes bestowed by a freedom fully expressed.

Perhaps this is precisely what the aesthetic experience is: the emotion brought about by a form which has been neither intellectualised nor objectivised, but actually felt, or even appropriated.

In pondering the anthropological scope of Keaton's influence, Francis Ramirez attempts to convey the universal aspect of the great comic's body of work: 'With Keaton, beauty – if in fact beauty can be scientifically proven – resides in the plastic, even theoretical, representation of man as seen through the comic actor's body. In other words, Keaton uses his own body to shape Man's ideas, Man's calligrammes; these graphic ideas are so basic that people, recognising themselves in the ideal strokes sketched by Keaton, come to accept themselves and find themselves attractive' (Ramirez, 1997: 91).

Moreover, when Keaton's art was at its height in the 1920s, the economic organisation of society, both in and outside of America, had already evolved to such an extent that only a very small minority of audience members could still identify with the experience of the body as represented by Keaton: this blissful enjoyment of the body and from the body. This 'concrete intelligence' (Noël Carroll, 1976, 1990) exemplified by the character is reminiscent of a time when man was still a *homo faber*. Yet, the time when the predominant way of working encouraged this attitude with respect to the body was not so long past. Keaton's films reminded his contemporaries of this heritage; today, this evocation of a 'lost contact' and this *kinetic awakening* are as strong as ever.

With Keaton, furthermore, the search for beauty is not a sterile one. The images in his films, though visually dazzling from a superficial point of view, have nevertheless a certain depth to them. It is in fact often with respect to a film's narrative context or to the primary traits of a given character that this formal aspect can best be interpreted.

Let us take, as a single example among countless others, the famous sequence from *The Cameraman* (1928) in which Keaton's lovelorn character Luke Shannon is at home eagerly awaiting a telephone call from the object of his affection, who will be calling to set up a date. From early morning on, he waits in his room, ready to run down the stairs as soon as the phone starts to ring; when it finally does, the young man leaps down the stairs as fast as he can, the camera following him down. But when a woman arrives just before him and picks up the receiver, Luke makes his way back up the stairs so profoundly absorbed in his disappointment that he walks past his room and continues up to the roof of the building. The telephone rings again and the same race downstairs recommences, only this time, Luke's great enthusiasm takes him past the phone and down into the basement. He finally manages to answer the phone, and the simpering girl informs him that she is free and waiting for him. What happens next is classic: the young man immediately drops the receiver and sets off on a mad race across town, arriving on the girl's doorstep before she has even had the chance to hang up the earpiece. What the spectator of the scene witnesses is a systematic exploration of space deliberately reduced to geometric lines. Keaton exploits the vertical plane three times in rapid succession before making a final dash across town on the horizontal plane. The scene, decomposed choreographically, is a play on lines that are at once straight, clean, and pure. The rectilinear nature of the sequence is, of course, much more than a mere decorative device: it is the very subject of the sequence and serves to define concretely the lover's enthusiasm and sincerity.

Any number of similar examples might be cited here, yet this representative scene sums up the essential aspect. Although he is often categorised as 'modern' (or a 'modernist') given his enthusiasm for the budding cinematographic technologies of his time, Keaton is also aesthetically 'modern': in his films, forms, as drawn out by the comic actor's own body, and ideas fuse together and coexist.

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